

**A Report by Ammonius, a Monk, Concerning the Holy Fathers
Slaughtered by the Barbarians at Mount Sina and at Rhaithou**



[1] Once, while sitting in my humble cell near Alexandria at a place called Canobus,¹ the thought occurred to me to travel to the regions of Palestine. My primary reason was that I could not bear to see the tribulations and danger that arose daily for the faithful under the lawless tyrants,³⁰ and [to see] our most Holy Archbishop, Peter, hiding and fleeing from place to place,³¹ unable to shepherd his sacred flock with freedom and ease. At the same time, I also desired to see the revered holy places and venerate the precious Tomb, the immaculate, life-giving [Church of the] Resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ,² and the rest of the revered holy places in which our Lord Jesus Christ was present and performed his incredible, awe-inspiring mysteries.

[2] Upon arriving at those revered, holy places I venerated each and every holy area and location, taking great cheer in all of God's great works and deeds. And once I had enjoyed the revered, holy places for a sufficient number of days as I desired, I decided also [to visit] the Holy Mountain called Sina, so that I might be privileged to adore it, too.³ Having found a group of other Christ-loving men who were going there,⁴ I set off through the desert. With the assistance of God who loves mankind, we reached that holy place in eighteen days.⁵ After making my prayers, I stayed on a few days to take pleasure in the spiritual holy men, visiting them frequently in their cells for my benefit. All week long they would sit in solitude, but on the evening of the Sabbath [i.e. Saturday], at the dawning of the Lord's Day [i.e. Sunday],⁶ all of them would gather in the Lord's House to make the night-time prayers together and partake of the immaculate, life-giving Mysteries in the morning. Then each would return to his own place. In their appearance and way of life they were angelic, for they looked exceedingly pale, and, since they had worn their bodies down with extreme abstinence, they were nearly incorporeal. They possessed absolutely nothing conducive to pleasure or luxury: no wine, no oil, no bread at all, just a few dates or nuts from which they make a light, simple diet for their bodies. But a small amount of bread is stored with the superior of the place for the guests who visit for the sake of prayer.⁷

[3] After a few days a multitude of Saracens suddenly fell upon us, because the one who was in possession of the phylarchy had died.⁸ All of those whom they found in the surrounding dwellings, they killed, but those whom they did not find escaped to the stronghold as soon as they heard the uproar.⁹ With them went the holy father superior. His name was Doulas [i.e. 'Slave'], since he was truly a slave of Christ: his patience and gentleness were great, like no one else's, and for this reason almost everyone used to call him Moses.¹⁰

[4] They killed all whom they captured at Gethrambē (these were many), as well as at Horeb, Kodar, and the rest of the places near the Holy Mountain.¹¹ They reached us also, and in a short time would have killed us too, since no one opposed them. But God who loves mankind, who always extends His hand to those who call on Him with their whole mind, commanded a great flame to appear at the top of the Holy Mountain summit. We saw the whole mountain smoking,

and fire rising up to heaven.**12** We all began to tremble and faint with fear at the sight. We threw ourselves on our faces and made obeisance to the Lord, pleading for Him to make our present straits turn out for the best. When the Barbarians saw that incredible spectacle, they all cowered and fled in an instant. Most of them even left their weapons and camels behind, unable to endure for another moment that turn of the scales.

[5] Then when we saw them flee, we thanked and glorified God, who in the end did not neglect those who had called upon Him.**13** We came down from the tower**14** and sought to learn which of the fathers had been slain, and in which place. We soon found thirty-eight persons dead with all sorts of wounds all over their bodies – but no one could tell us their manner of death, since no one had seen what had happened. Twelve of the holy men we found in the Gethrambē monastery, the rest in various other places. But Isaiah and Sabas were still breathing, although they had been deeply wounded. We took care of these wounded men as soon as we had buried the slain with great sorrow.

[6] Who could be so hard and unfeeling as not to weep or mourn bitterly at the sight of saintly, devout old men [Elders/Gerondas]**15** strewn pitifully over the ground? One had his head hanging off his body, held on only by the skin; another was cut in half; another took such a blow to his head that his eyeballs burst out; the feet and hands of another had been cut off and were lying on the ground like dead wood. Why say more? Words cannot express what we saw as we examined the bodies of the holy ones.

[7] As for the two wounded brothers, Isaiah died in the Lord when evening fell the next day, but Sabas held on to hope of recovery, since his wound was not very serious. He thanked God for the grievous things that had befallen him, but was troubled that he had not been worthy of [inclusion in] the list of the holy fathers.**16** He cried out, saying, ‘Alas for the sinner, alas for me, who was unworthy of the choir of holy fathers that died for Christ’s sake, who was rejected in the eleventh hour, who saw the harbour of the Kingdom, but did not enter it.’ Then he prayed, saying, ‘Lord God, Ruler of all, who sent His only begotten Son for the salvation of the human race, You who alone are good and love mankind, do not separate me from my holy fathers who died before me, but with me let the number forty of Your slaves be fulfilled.**17** Yes, Lord Jesus Christ, grant that this happen, because I have followed you since childbirth and greatly longed for you, unclean sinner though I am.’ After the blessed one said these things, he also gave up his holy soul on the fourth day after the death of the holy ones.

[8] While we were still mourning with grief in our souls and tears in our eyes for the holy ones, an Ishmaelite**18** came and told us that all the ascetics of the remote desert, in the place called Rhaithou, had died at the hands of the Black Ones.**19** The place was two days away from us, located on the coast of the Red Sea. Here there were twelve springs and seventy palm trees according to Scripture, but now that number has increased with time.**20**

[9] We asked the man to describe the manner in which they had died and how many there were, but he said that he did not know; he said that he had only heard that the monks who lived there had been slain, and that this was the rumour going around. Then others came and told us the same thing. After a few days one of the monks who had lived there came to the Holy Mountain, seeking to live here, seeing that his own desert had been utterly devastated by the Blemmyes.²¹ When the saintly superior Doulas found out, he warmly received him and asked him to inform him exactly what had befallen the holy fathers, how he had safely escaped the Barbarians, and with what virtuous acts those holy ones had adorned themselves.

[10] He began his narrative by saying, ‘Venerable Father, I had not lived in the place many years, for my sojourn there was only about twenty years,²² while others had been there a very long time – forty, fifty, and sixty years. It is a completely flat place that stretches out in a long plain to the south, and it is about twelve miles wide. To the east the mountains are like a wall, impassable for those not familiar with the place.²³ To the west is the Red Sea that extends, they say, all the way to the ocean. Looming up over this sea is a mountain from which twelve springs issue forth,⁶¹ watering a multitude of palm trees.

[11] ‘Now, many anchorites had their dwelling on this mountain, living as the Apostle says, “in mountains and in caves and in holes in the ground”.²⁴ Their Lord’s House was not on the mountain itself, but near it.²⁵ Although of the earth, these men were truly heavenly, and in their souls were equal to angels, whose conduct they achieved. By scorning their bodies as if they were alien to them, they attained not merely one virtue, but fully adorned themselves in all. Since, my dear ones, I cannot describe all the contests, struggles, and temptations that the devil raised against them, it will suffice for me to recall just one or two of their innumerable acts, so that whoever hears about them might understand that the rest were also such.

[12] ‘Moses had been a monk since early age – for he was also a native of that place, having originated from Pharan.²⁶ He passed seventy-three years in the monastic life, living on the mountain in a cave not far from the assembly place.²⁷ He was truly like a second Elijah, for everything he asked God for was given to him.²⁸ The Lord performed a great many healings through him, having granted him dominion over unclean spirits, so that he cured many, and made Christians of nearly all the lay folk who were within the confines of the Ishmaelites and dwelled in the regions of Pharan. When they saw the many prodigies and signs performed by him, they believed in the Lord and went forth to the holy, universal church to be privileged with Holy Baptism. It was said that by Christ’s grace he delivered many from the sickness of unclean spirits.

[13] ‘Ever since he had become a solitary, this saintly, thrice-blessed Moses had never tasted bread, though others ate it: for when the men of the place brought grain from Egypt, they would

supply them with a few loaves of bread in exchange for their handicrafts.²⁹ But they also used to eat fruit from palm trees, and the blessed Moses took a few dates for nourishment, along with water to drink, and he made his clothes from palm fibres. He cherished tranquillity more than anyone else, and kindly received anyone who came to him with questions about their thoughts. He slept only after the night-time offices, spending the rest of the time keeping vigils, making prayers, and glorifying God. But during the Holy Forty he did not open the door of his cell at all until the Holy, Great Thursday, bringing nothing inside for nourishment except twenty dates and a beaker of water. Often he saved these until the moment he opened his door. So his attendant told me.

[14] ‘During the Holy Forty a man named Obedianus, the leading citizen among the pagans, came under the control of an unclean spirit and was brought from Pharan to him for a cure. As he approached the old man’s cell and was about a stade away, that wicked, unclean spirit made him shake and howl aloud, “What violence! not even for a moment did I manage to interrupt the regimen of that evil old man!”³⁰ And with these words he came out of the person. The man was instantly healed and believed in Christ, as did many others. In this way they all became worthy of Holy Baptism. I could say many other things about him, but I will keep silent, since now is not the appropriate moment to tell them.

[15] ‘This blessed Moses had a disciple by the name of Psoēs who was from the region of the Thebaïd. He had dwelled above him for forty-six years.³¹ He did not make a single change to the old man’s regimen, but became, so to speak, the seal and the imprint both of what he saw and what he was taught. I myself lived with him too in the beginning, but I had to leave because of his unspeakably great austerity, since I could not endure the contests, perseverance, and bodily mortification of his discipline. Later he too died in the Lord together with the rest of those who were slain. ‘And not only about these, but also about each one of those [who were killed] could I recall things greater and loftier than these, describing what they have done and displayed. But all the same, I’ll pass over them all to describe just one holy man’s work: for it would not be right to leave forgotten in silence such an awesome, incredible deed.

[16] ‘A certain Joseph was born in Aila³² and lived far from the water, about two miles on the plain,³³ where he built a dwelling with his own hands. The man was holy, saintly, discerning, and perfect in every way, having been filled with God’s grace. He had been in that place for some thirty years and had a disciple, who did not dwell with him but in another dwelling nearby. One day one of the brothers visited this holy, righteous man with a question about a thought. When he knocked, he got no answer. Peering in through the entrance he saw him standing entirely from head to toe like a flame of fire.³⁴

‘Filled with fear and trembling, his body went weak, and he collapsed on the ground like dead for an hour. Then he stood up again and sat down at the door. The saintly old man was still

occupied with his vision and did not know what had happened. Five full hours passed before he appeared to be human once more. Then he opened the door and let the brother inside. After they sat down he said to the brother, “When did you come?” He replied to the old man, “It has been four or five hours ago since I came by, but I did not knock till now, so as not to disturb you.”

‘The old man realized that the brother was aware of what had happened to him, yet he said nothing about it to him. Instead he answered all the questions he was asked and cured the brother of his thought, then released him in peace. Afterwards he disappeared because he feared receiving fame among humans.

[17] ‘Later his disciple, Abba Gelasius, came but could not find him. After repeatedly searching for the old man without finding him, he lived in his cell, feeling quite perturbed because of him. After six years someone knocked on the door around the eighth hour.³⁵ Gelasius went and saw his abba standing outside. Stunned by the vision, he thought it was a spirit. But without making an uproar, he said to him, “Say a prayer, Father.” When he said a prayer, [Gelasius] received him with joy, and they embraced each other with a holy kiss.³⁶

‘The old man [Joseph] said, “You did well, my child, by asking for a prayer first, because the devil has many tricks.” And the brother replied, “Why did you decide, Venerable Father, to separate yourself from your community, leaving me an orphan? I’ve been very distressed because of you.” The old man said to him, “God knows the reason I did not appear. And yet, to this day I have never been away from this place, nor has a single Lord’s Day passed that I have not shared with all of you in the holy, life-giving Mysteries of Christ.”³⁷

‘And the brother was amazed that the old man had come in and out without anyone seeing him. Afterwards he asked the old man, “Why have you returned just now to your slave, Father?” The old man replied, “Because, my son, today I am migrating to the Lord from this wretched body. I have come to leave it to you, so that you might bury it as you wish and give the earth back its own.”³⁸

‘After conversing with the brother at length about the soul and the good things to come, he spread out his hands and feet and fell asleep in peace, delivering his venerable, holy soul to the hands of the living God. Then at once Brother Gelasius ran off to assemble us all. With psalm singing and palm-leaves we went and conveyed him to the Lord’s House. His face was brighter than the sun. We laid him to rest with the holy fathers who had fallen asleep before him.

[18] ‘As I’ve said before, there are many more things I could say, but I’ll be content with these, since the occasion requires me to say more about the Barbarians. I can see that you want to hear about them above all.

‘The saintly, holy fathers were of such a kind, leading a perfect life in great poverty and freedom from possessions. Nobly did they endure tribulation and mortification for the sake of the Lord, occupying themselves with prayers and supplications alone, blameless in Christ our God. Altogether we were forty-three in number, each practising asceticism alone and aware only of God, who knows whatever is hidden.³⁹ While we were living this way, two men came to us with a report. They came from the opposite coast, having crossed the open sea on timbers from a foreign land, timbers found in regions of Ethiopia. They said, “A multitude of Blemmyes have attacked a boat from Aila that was anchored in that place, and they captured it,⁴⁰ intending to go to Clysma by sea.⁴¹ Once they had seized control of it they said to us, ‘Take us to Clysma and we will not kill any of you’. So we promised them to do this and kept watch for a day when the south wind was blowing so that we might set sail. With God watching us, we were able to escape from their hands during the night. Behold! we are warning you to be alert for a while and save your souls, lest when they pass by this place they attack here too and kill everyone. There are about three hundred of them in number.”

[19] ‘Upon hearing these things we stood on alert. We placed watchmen by the sea so that if they saw the ship coming, they could warn us in advance, and we were praying and calling on God to bring about what was good for our souls. The next day at evening the boat was seen under sail and coming towards us.

‘And the lay folk, all of those who happened to be in the Place of the Pharanites,⁴³ also prepared themselves for war against the Blemmyes for the sake of their wives, children, and herds of camels. All of them – about two hundred excluding women and small children – assembled a short distance above the palm trees, while we took refuge in our Lord’s House. It was fortified with brick walls about twice the height of a man.

‘The Barbarians seized the harbour where the sailors had guided them. That night they stayed on the westward side of the mountain, a short distance away from the springs. When morning came they tied up the sailors and left them in that place, but put one of them on the boat to guard it, leaving one of the Black Ones with him so that he could not sail off alone.

‘They came to the springs, and the natives met them to make war. The din of battle rose near the hills and springs and between the cisterns. Dense volleys of arrows flew from both sides. The Black Ones, inasmuch as they were more numerous and well trained to make evil, routed our men and murdered one hundred and forty-seven of them. The rest were able to escape, some through the mountain, others by hiding among the trees, each one saving himself wherever he could. But the lawless ones took their women and children and held them near the springs.

[20] ‘Next, like fierce, wild beasts they came running at us in the so-called “Fort”,⁴⁴ thinking that they would find quantities of money hidden there. They circled around us, bellowing

incomprehensibly and threatening us in barbaric speech. In extreme danger, we all were overcome with despair, having no idea what to do. Turning our eyes up towards God, we wept, pouring out our hearts. Some of us bore their distress with high, noble spirits, others shed tears; one gave thanks in prayer, another consoled his neighbour, while together we all exclaimed the Kyrie Eleēson [‘Lord have mercy’].



[21] ‘Our most holy father, Paul, who was born in Petra,⁴⁵ stood up in the middle of the church and said,

“Fathers and Brothers, listen to me, though I be a sinner and the least of all. Today each of you knows that we are all in this place for the sake of our Master and Lord Jesus Christ. For love of Him, we withdrew from that vain world to this harsh, rocky desert. Although we are unworthy, sinful men, we have been privileged to bear his yoke⁴⁶ by living in hunger, thirst, extreme poverty and tribulation. That is to say, we have despised all the vain and transient things of this life so that we might be privileged to become companions with Him in His kingdom.⁴⁷

“Even now at this hour nothing will happen or befall us without Him. If He should suddenly will to free us from this vain, fleeting existence and hold us with Himself, we ought to rejoice, exult, give thanks and not grieve at this. For what could be sweeter or more delightful than to see His glory and His awesome face? Do you remember, my Brothers and Fathers, how when sitting down together we always used to speak of the blessedness of the holy men who had suffered holy martyrdom for the sake of His name, and how we used to desire that we too might be found among them? Behold, children, the time has come to fulfil our desire, so that you may live with them, as you desire, for ages upon ages in the life to come. So do not grieve or lament or cower or do anything unworthy of yourselves, but gird yourselves eagerly and confidently with power,⁴⁸ endure death nobly, and God will readily welcome you into His kingdom.”

[22] ‘In response, all replied, “As you have spoken, Venerable Father, so shall we do. For ‘how can we repay the Lord for all that He has given to us? We will take the cup of salvation and call upon the name of the Lord’”.⁴⁹

‘Then that most holy father of ours turned towards the east, reached out his hands to heaven and said, “Lord Jesus Christ our God, the only Holy and All-Powerful One, Hope and Help of us all, forget not Your slaves, but remember our poverty and misery. Empower us in this hour of need, and receive all of our spirits as a pleasing sacrifice with a sweet-smelling fragrance,⁵⁰ because honour and glory befits You alone, now and forever.”

[23] ‘And when we said “Amen”, we all heard a voice coming from the altar: “Come to me, all you who are weary and carry heavy burdens, and I will give you rest.”⁵¹ At the sound of this voice, fear and trembling took hold of us all. Our hearts and knees began to quake, showing that, as the Lord said, “The spirit is willing, but the flesh is weak.”⁵² Then we all turned our eyes to heaven, having lost hope for this life.

‘Since no one was resisting or opposing them, the Barbarians brought long pieces of wood and used them to get over the wall and come inside. They opened the gates and the rest rushed in like fierce, wild beasts with unsheathed swords in their hands. The first they seized was a monk

named Jeremiah who was sitting at the gate of the Lord's House. Through one of their interpreters, they told him, "Show us which one is your chief." Gazing on their barbaric faces and unsheathed swords without any terror or fear, he replied, "I am not afraid of you impious enemies of God. Nor will I reveal to you him whom you seek, although he is standing nearby."

[24] 'The Barbarians were stunned by the man's high-spirited sharpness, seeing that he not only did not fear them in the least but even had insulted them. At last, they seized him, bound him hand and foot, stood him up naked before them, and shot him with so many arrows that no part of his body was left intact. Thus he contended and struggled with manly valour against the devil, and was, first of all, to put on the crown, struggling nobly unto death, stamping on the serpent's head,⁵³ to become a holy first-fruit⁵⁴ and fine exemplar for the holy ones.⁵⁵

[25] 'When our most holy Father Paul saw this, he came right out and told them in a loud voice, "I'm the one you're looking for," pointing a finger at himself to indicate that he was the one they were seeking. And the noble slave of Christ, Paul, gave himself up to the Barbarians without any fear or thought for the blows and torments that the lawless ones were going to inflict on him before his death. They seized him and interrogated him, saying, "Tell us the truth. Where have you hidden your money?" The saint replied in his usual soft tone and gentle manner, saying, "Believe me, children, my whole life, I've owned nothing more than this old hair shirt you see on my body." He took his hand, clasped his cloak, and showed it to them.

[26] 'Beating him on his neck with stones and piercing his cheeks and his face with arrows, they kept shouting, "Bring here your money!" After torturing and mocking him for a long time without finding anything, they finally struck him in the middle of the head with a sword blade. His holy head was split in half and fell off his shoulders, one part off this side and one part off that. After he received still more blows all over his body, he lay dead at the feet of the father who had died before him. After enduring many unimaginable tortures before his death, he became the second victor and trophy-bearer against the devil without expressing any grief or yielding in his purpose at all.

[27] 'But as for me, miserable man that I am, as I watched this bitter, inhumane death and the holy ones' venerable blood pouring out all over and their innards splattered on the ground, I searched in fear for a place where I could flee and be saved. To the left, by the corner of the house, lay some leafy palm branches. While the Barbarians were occupied with the holy Paul, I quickly fled under the palm fronds, thinking that one of two things would happen: either I would escape without the Barbarians noticing me, or I would be caught and endure nothing more than death.

[28] 'The villainous, lawless Barbarians left the two dead men outside and stampeded into the church like a herd of wild beasts, bellowing, beating the air with their swords and waving their

hands as they began to make murder. Each struck this way or that, murdering whoever happened to fall in his path. One brought his sword down on a head, another drove his into a stomach up to the hilt and extracted with it all of its contents; another cast his spear through someone's back into his heart, then pulled it out, depriving that holy man of life.'

As he related these things to us he wept bitterly, moving us all to lament and wail as well.

[29] Again he said to us, 'What can I say, or how can I express or describe, Dear Ones, exactly what my eyes have seen? There was a monk there named Adam who had a relative named Sergius who was a monk and about fifteen years old. The old man had raised him from childhood and had given him monastic instruction since he was a babe, so that he was well instructed concerning warfare with the enemy. When the Barbarians saw that he had a delicate face and was still young in age, they wanted to set him aside. One of the Barbarians seized the brother with his own hand and dragged him outside and held him. But when he saw that he was not being privileged to die with the other fathers, but might instead become a travelling companion for cruel and impious human beings, he began to cry, wailing bitterly. Then, since he saw that it was no use, he cast aside all fear and cowardice. His spirits rekindled, he sprang up, and with a bold, noble resolve he ran like a noble soldier and grabbed a sword from one of the Barbarians and struck one of them on the shoulder, so that they might become so enraged by this that they would kill him – which is just what happened. Dumbfounded, the accursed ones became greatly enraged; rolling their eyes and gnashing their teeth, they butchered him limb by limb. Meanwhile, he exulted, shouting, "Blessed be the Lord our God, who did not deliver us to the hands of sinful humans!" After saying this, he too died in peace. Even after he was dead he received blows and wounds all over his body – that marvellous man and slave of Christ, Sergius.

[30] 'As I watched these things I was pleading to our merciful God who loves mankind that he might conceal me from the Barbarians and blind their eyes so that they would not see me and I might be saved to bury the holy ones' bodies. The entire church was filled with the blood of the fallen holy men. They had shown no fear or distress, but had rejoiced and thanked the Lord for what had befallen them. With their minds set on heaven, they had conducted themselves well on earth for their Master and Lord, becoming a temple of God in the Highest. They left the transient and corrupting things of this life to follow God alone. After all that they perished in diverse ways, under tribulation and sword blade.

'Now that they believed they had killed everyone, the savage, ferocious Barbarians searched everywhere, thinking they would find things stored away. The wretches did not realize that the martyrs, who had gained all heaven, had nothing on earth but their bodies.

[31] 'As these things happened, almost all my blood left me, the least one of all. I lay still as a corpse, sure that they would also inspect the palm branches and find me hiding. I kept peering

through the palm-fronds to see when they would come to me. As the saying goes, I saw death before my eyes, and continually supplicated God Who loves mankind to save me if it pleased Him. They came right up to me, but when they saw that they were only palms, they withdrew in contempt. They went away without discovering the place I was in, since God had darkened their eyes and hearts.



[32] ‘They left the holy ones piled on top of each other. Having found nothing to take, they returned to the springs, intending to resume their journey to Clysma by sea. But when they came to the beach they discovered that their boat had been smashed up. For the man who stayed to guard it was a Christ-loving man; undetected by the Barbarian who had been left with him, he had cut the boat’s ropes and had cast it upon the rocks. It was completely smashed. In this way he also killed the Barbarian. He escaped by swimming toward the mountain, truly reaching safety with God’s help.

[33] ‘Bereft of hope, with no idea what to do or how to return to their country, the Barbarians lost courage and became aggrieved, there being nothing they could do. Seized by great anger and fury, they first killed all the souls they had set aside, a multitude of women and children. Then they built a great fire and ruthlessly burned the palm trees so that nearly all were destroyed by fire. Such was the activity that was occupying them in their rage and frustration over their homeland, when a multitude of Ishmaelite men came from Pharan, six hundred in number, all

select archers. They had heard what had happened.⁵⁶ The Barbarians saw them approaching and prepared for battle.

[34] ‘They met in battle as the sun rose on the plain. Both sides shot dense volleys of arrows at the other. The Pharanites, in as much as they were more numerous, killed most of the Barbarians, but since the Barbarians no longer had any hope of escape or expectation of safety, they nobly resisted and fought to hold their ground. The battle lasted until the ninth hour.⁵⁷ That day, eighty-four Pharanite men were killed and many others wounded, while all the Barbarians died in that very spot without turning their backs on the enemy or budging from their position.

[35] ‘While they were busy with this activity – I mean, cutting down the Barbarians – I gained some confidence and came out from where I was hiding. I examined the bodies of the holy men after their slaughter. I found that all had died in the Lord except for three brothers: Domnus, Andreas, and Orion. Of these three, Domnus lay in terrible agony, with a very deep blow to his side. Andreas had many wounds, but not very serious, and he survived. Orion, however, received no wound at all. A Barbarian had struck him with a sword on the right side. The sword had gone through his cloak and out the left side, but its blade had passed through his hairshirt without touching his body. Thinking he was dead, the Barbarian left him there and went on to another. Orion threw himself on the pile of bodies and lay like a corpse. This Orion then got up and went around with me, scouring for the remains of the holy men and grieving and mourning greatly with me because of the terrible things that had befallen us.

[36] ‘After the men from Pharan had cut down and wiped out all the Blemmyes, they returned, leaving the bodies of the Barbarians on the edge of the sea as food for birds, beasts, and winged things of the air. After collecting their own people’s bodies, both those who had died earlier and the many who died later, they raised for them a loud lament. They buried them at the foot of the mountain, in caves close to the springs. Then they came back to us and prepared the burial of the holy men, together with their chief, Obedianus. When they entered to collect the bodies, we uttered lamentations, bitterly groaning and beating our chests, because we saw Christ’s flock cast down on the ground, like sheep laid waste by wolves.⁵⁸

‘For Christ’s slaves and martyrs had frightful, unbearable wounds. One had a gash from his shoulder to his navel, another was lying on the ground, cut in two; another received a blow from his forehead to his neck; another had half his guts laying in his stomach and the rest splattered on the earth. Thus they all died in this way or that, with blows on every limb of their body. To the eye they were men whose bodies were on the earth. But since their minds were set on heaven, they never held a thought for their bodily tabernacles; instead, they “ever carried the death of Jesus around in their bodies”,⁵⁹ so that they might have life in the world to come. All their lives they conducted themselves in a goodly manner pleasing to God, and at the end of their lives they

received an additional virtue, for they were washed by their own blood and enlisted among the martyrs, since all had died for the sake of the Lord and His eternal kingdom.



[37] ‘Once all their remains had been gathered into one place, the Christloving Obedianus and the rest of the headmen of Pharan⁶⁰ brought bright, costly garments for their honour,⁶¹ and buried the holy men. They were thirty-nine in number since Domnus, who was born a Roman, was still alive. Then all those who were there took palm-branches and went to meet the holy ones in a procession. With great joy and psalm singing we carried the remains of the holy ones and laid them down across from the Fort, all except for Domnus. But when evening came, he also gave up his spirit to Christ. We carried and buried him, not with the holy men, but separately in a place close by them, so that we would not disturb the holy martyrs of Christ by opening the tomb again.

[38] ‘The holy martyrs of Christ died on the fourteenth of the month of January.⁶² Abba Andreas and Orion remained there, trying to make up their minds whether to stay in the place or leave it. But I could not bear the tribulation of the desolation of that place, nor could I cease from lamenting those who were slain. So I came to you. Often the Christ-loving Obedianus had asked me to stay in that place, promising to visit us regularly and minister happily to our needs. But I could not be persuaded, for the reasons I have already stated.

[39] 'Some other things befell us which I will describe to you in detail. But please tell me what went on here, since I have already given you exact information about my own circumstances.' We told him everything then and there, and we all were amazed at the incredible works of God, since all had died on the same day, both those on the Holy Mountain and those at Rhaithou, and because the number who died was the same both there and here. Once again we began to wail and mourn about the things described.

[40] Then Abba Doulas, the superior, stood up and said, 'My dear ones, those men like worthy slaves and chosen servants of Christ have been privileged with His joy and kingdom. After so many contests, tribulations, and temptations, they at last put on the crown of martyrdom, and live now in great honour and glory in heaven. As for us, Fathers and Brothers, let us remain steadfast in the things that please God. Let us ask them to represent us before Christ, so that we may have a share with them in the Kingdom of Heaven, and let us unanimously thank our good God who loves mankind for sheltering us from the profane and murderous hands of [the Barbarians].' As he spoke these words the father restored us all, comforting all of us in our souls with his many words of encouragement.

[41] Then I, the humble Ammonius, with God's help returned to the regions of Egypt. I wrote down everything on paper. I never went back to my original abode, the one called Canobus, but moved to a very small dwelling near Memphis in which I now live.⁶³ I read these notes constantly,¹⁶¹ and rejoice every day in their contests and sufferings, as ever I glorify and praise Christ, our true God, to Whom is the power and the glory unto eternity, Amen.

[42] I, John the Priest, found these things with God's help in the possession of a certain anchorite living near Naucratis.⁶⁴ They were written in Egyptian script, which I have translated (since I know the Egyptian language well) into Greek for the glory and praise of the holy martyrs and righteous ones, with whom may the Lord give us a share in His kingdom. I ask all who encounter [this account] to pray on behalf of my worthless self, glorifying the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now, always, and unto the ages of ages, Amen.¹⁶⁴

Source: Daniel F. Caner, *History and Hagiography from the Late Antique Sinai*, Liverpool University Press, 2010, pp. 149-171.

NOTES

1. Canopus (= Canopus, modern Abukir), a wealthy suburb about 20 km/12.5 miles northeast of Alexandria. Theophilus, bishop of Alexandria (385–412), founded here the monastery of Metanoia that later became known as a refuge and outpost of Chalcedonianism in Egypt.
2. The Resurrection (*Anastasis*) was a circular church built on Golgotha by Emperor Constantine to enclose Christ's tomb (*Taphos*). It was part of the church complex that also included the Basilica of Constantine that housed the Wood of the Cross.
3. In the sixth and seventh centuries the verb ἀσπάζομαι (lit. 'to kiss, to embrace'; here translated as 'adore') often referred to the kissing of sacred objects (e.g. altars or icons).
4. Evidently pilgrims going to the Sinai commonly sought out travelling companions at Jerusalem: e.g. *Life of St. Matrona of Perge* 14.
5. This conforms exactly to the total distance (18 staging-posts) recorded in the sixth-century *Itinerarium Theodosii* for the eastern route (Jerusalem–Elusa–Aila–Sinai) to Sinai.
6. The new day began at the previous day's sunset. *Ps.-Nilus*, Narr. III.12, says that Sinai monks congregated in church only on Sundays. Cf. Palladius, *Lausiac History* 7.5.
7. I.e. the superior kept bread in his residence to feed Sinai pilgrims. Mayerson 1980, 140, argues that Ammonius' use of the title προεστῶς, 'superior', rather than ἡγούμενος, 'leader', reflects a lack of organized monasticism on Sinai at the time of composition. But the term is commonly used to designate a leader of a coenobitic monastery in literary texts and papyri from the fifth century onwards.
8. ἀποθανόντος τοῦ κρατοῦντος τὴν φυλαρχίαν. A phylarch was a tribal leader allied to the Romans, bound to keep peace between tribesmen and Roman citizens.
9. For this stronghold (ὄχυρῶμα), see below, n.
10. Gentleness and humility were Moses' cardinal virtues: see Num. 12:7 and *Ps.-Nilus*, Narr. III.16. For use of the honorific name 'second Moses' at Sinai, see Anast., Narr. I.12 and I.16.
11. 2 Gethrambē (Geth Rabbi?) is presumably the Bēthrambē mentioned by *Ps.-Nilus*, Narr. VI.10 (perhaps modern Dayr Rabba); Horēb is presumably Mt Horeb (Jaba Sufsaḥa); Kodar is otherwise unknown. See Dahari 2000, 156–57. V (but not Ar. I): *in (the church of) the holy Mar (= St) Sergius, and on Horeb*.
12. Cf. Exod. 19:18, 20:18. Lightning storms are not unusual on the Sinai: Hobbs 1995, 55.
13. Cf. Pss. 12:2; 43:24; 73:1; and 19:76, 4–9.
14. It is not clear if this 'tower' (πύργος) is the same stronghold (ὄχυρῶμα) mentioned in section 3, or a tower within it. Foundations have been found for what appears to have been a pre-Justinianic tower near the Justinianic church in the Sinai monastery.
15. 'Old man' (Geron/Geronda/Elder) was a term of respect that became synonymous with 'monastic elder'.

16. τοῦ καταλόγου τῶν ἁγίων πατέρων. This reference to a ‘list’ (katalogos: cf. Lampe 1961 s.v.) of martyrs indicates the probable source of Ammonius’ information for this section.
17. In the legend of the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste (BHG 1201–1208), a Roman guard joins the number of Sebaste martyrs in order to round off the number of martyrs at forty. Cf. Basil of Caesarea, [*Homily on the Forty Martyrs of Sebaste*](#) 6, dated 373, trans. P. Allen in Leemans–Mayer–Allen–Dhandschutter 2003, 73: ‘Let the fortieth of us be crowned, Master. Let not even one person be missing from that number. It is an honorable [number], which you honored in your fast of forty days ...’
18. ‘Ishmaelite’ was commonly used for Saracens, i.e. nomadic Arabs.
19. CPA: were all killed by the barbarians. CPA and L never use Mauroi (‘Black Ones’ or ‘Moors’ - the Greek has Μαύροι), but V has: Cushites, that is, Blacks.
20. CPA: as described in Exodus, ‘seventy palms and twelve springs’. L: as described in the Law. V: as mentioned in the Law, where Moses and the Children of Israel left the sea. ‘According to Scripture’: Exod. 15:27, referring to Elim. The increase of palms is also noted in the sixth century by CI, Top. christ. V.14.
21. The name ‘Blemmyes’ was given to inhabitants of the Nile south of the first cataract (in present-day Sudan) who made raids on Roman territory from the fourth century onwards.
22. ‘Making oneself a foreigner’ (*xeniteia*/ξενιτεία), was an important monastic ideal whereby life anywhere on earth was considered a temporary sojourn, free of worldly attachments.
23. This seems to correspond with the site of Wadi al-Tur, the adjacent, 16-km/10-mile wide Qa’ desert, and the Jabal Umm Shomer massif, as well as (in CPA’s version) the Wadi Isla pass.
24. Heb. 11:38, describing prophets ‘of whom the world was not worthy’.
25. κυριακόν (‘Lord’s house’).
26. It has been argued that this is the Moses that became bishop of the Saracens at the request of their queen, Mavia, as recorded by Socrates, *EH* IV.36, Sozomen, *EH* VI.38, and Theodoret, *EH* IV.20.
27. οὐ μακρὰν τοῦ συνακτηρίου, i.e. the church where assemblies and services were held.
28. 1 [III] Kgs 19:8–9. Thus Ammonius gives Rhaithou a Moses and an Elijah, parallel to the heroes of Mt Sinai/Horeb.
29. This importation of Egyptian grain recalls the report in PP, Itin. 40, that sixth-century Pharanite soldiers received provisions from Egypt. Being the only good harbour on the western Sinai, Rhaithou would have been the logical site for depositing or receiving such provisions.
30. Here the Greek κακόγηρος/*kakogēros* (‘evil old man/geronda’) plays on a common title for a venerable monk, καλόγηρος/*kalogēros* (‘good old man/geronda’); cf. Anast., *Narr.* II.26.
31. The Thebaïd was the area in upper Egypt around modern Luxor where monasticism thrived in late antiquity.

32. Aila (Eliat/'Aqaba) was about 10 days' travel across the Sinai from Rhaithou.
33. About 3 km/1.5 miles.
34. Cf. *Apophthegmata patrum*, alphabetical collection, Arsenius 27 (PG 65.96BC): 'A brother visited Abba Arsenius' cell at Scetis. Waiting at the door, he saw the old man as if entirely on fire: for the brother was worthy to see this. And when he knocked, the elder came out, and saw the brother as if struck dumb with wonder. He said to him, "Have you been knocking long? Did you see anything here?" The brother said "No", and left after talking with him.' Cf. Silvanus 3.
35. Two in the afternoon.
36. Cf. Rom. 16:16.
37. I.e. he did not miss a single Divine Liturgy service.
38. 3Cf. Gen. 3:19.
39. Cf. Dan. 42, Mt. 6:6.
40. Blemmyes [L: barbarians]. In sect. 12 of the Greek version, 'that place' refers to Sinai, and we know that al-Tur, near the Rhaithou site, would have been the first good harbour for ships heading north to Clysma. However, the reference in the previous Greek sentence to the Ethiopian origin of the ship's wood suggests that the author wanted to explain 'that place' as Ethiopia. Procopius of Caesarea, *Wars* I.xix.24–25, notes that Ethiopian boats on the Red Sea were distinctive because their planks were bound together with cords and not smeared with pitch.
41. Clysma was important as a seaport for foreign trade and a juncture for travel between Egypt, Palestine, the Mediterranean and the Red Sea: see Egeria, *Itin.* PD,Y 5–6, PP, *Itin.* 42.
42. The northwest wind prevails in the Gulf of Suez, making sailing up the west Sinai coast difficult; cf. John Mosch., *Meadow* 120 (PG 86[3].2984BC). The south wind blows here mainly in winter, i.e. at exactly the time when Ammonius dates the attack.
43. An important detail, indicating that Pharan had a sizeable colony in the Rhaithou area, no doubt based there to facilitate trade and transport provisions inland. Cf. PP, *Itin.* 40.
44. κάστρον, the same term used to describe the Mt Sinai monastery in the seventh century (cf. John Clim., *Ladder* 7 [PG 88.812B]; Anast., *Narr.* II.8).
45. Probably Petra in modern Jordan, the nominal capital of Third Palestine.
46. Cf. Mt. 11:29–30.
47. Cf. 2 Cor. 1:7; 2 Pet. 1:4.
48. Cf. Lk. 24:29.
49. Ps. 116:12–13 [LXX 115:3–4]
50. Cf. Phil. 4:18.
51. Mt. 11:28.
52. Mt. 26:41.
53. Cf. Gen. 3:15.

54. Rom. 11:16, 'If the first fruits are holy, then so is the whole batch'. Jews and Christians in this period offered first fruits to God to ensure blessings for the rest of their produce.
55. Cf. the death of the magnanimous youth in Ps.-Nilus, *Narr.* V.16–17, and the death of St Stephen, the protomartyr, Acts 6:1–8:2.
56. By the sixth century Pharan had a state-supported, 800- (or 80-) man garrison to protect monks: see PP, Itin. 40 and note ad loc. Presumably, they were informed by the Pharanites who escaped after the battle in sect. 19.
57. Three in the afternoon.
58. Cf. Mt. 10:16; Lk. 10:3.
59. 2 Cor. 4:10.
60. The term *protoi* ('nobles', 'headmen', here *πρῶτοι τῆς Φαράν*) becomes commonly used for leading citizens of both cities and villages from the sixth century onwards.
61. To be used as burial shrouds; cf. Anast., *Narr.* I.28. Most of the colourful textiles that survive from Byzantine Egypt come from cemeteries.
62. The second day of the Egyptian month of Tubi (or Tybi) would have been 28 December.
63. Memphis (modern Mit Rahina, 22.5 km/14 miles south of Cairo) was the site of a military camp in late antiquity. Extensive ruins of the Monastery of Jeremias have been found on the opposite side of the Nile at Saqqara; it flourished from the late fifth to the mid-ninth centuries.
64. Naucratis (modern Kum Ga'if, Egypt) was approximately 83 km/52 miles south-east of Alexandria on the Canopic branch of the Nile.

